

Book Review: Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secrets of Being Productive by Charles Duhigg

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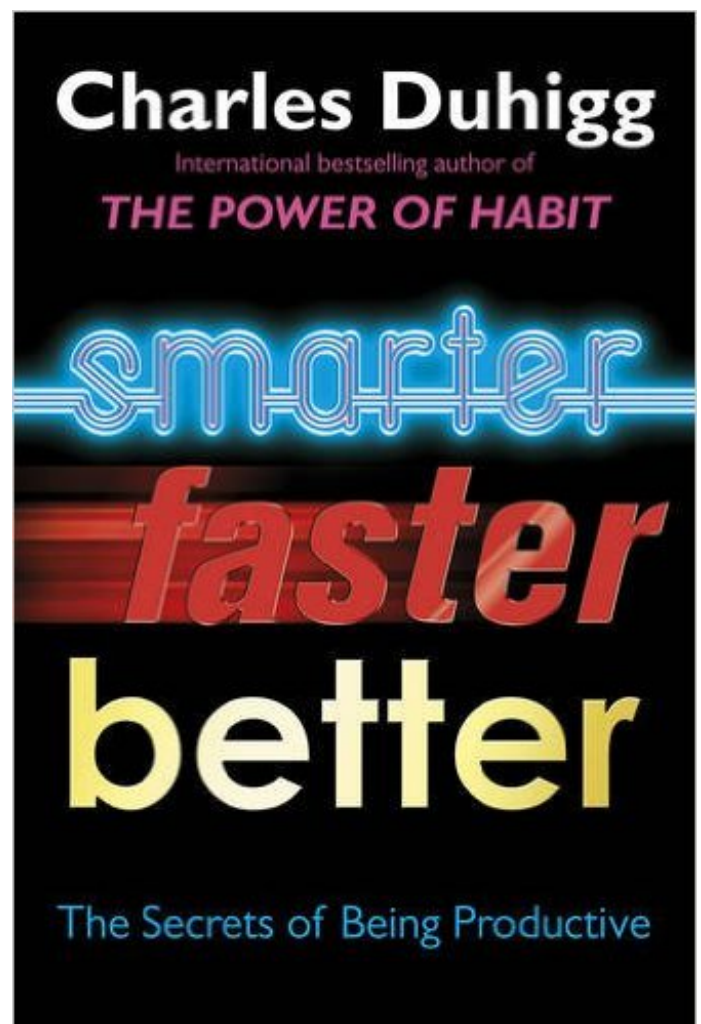
In Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive, Charles Duhigg presents eight key ideas that can maximise the productivity of organisations, companies and individuals, focusing on how we make choices and frame decisions in daily life. While finding that much of the text struggles to transcend the charge of 'obviousism', Richard Cotter does recommend two chapters that offer nuanced and striking insights of value to readers.

Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secrets of Being Productive. Charles Duhigg. William Heinemann. 2016.

Find this book: 

This is a self-help book. The clue is in the title, which promises to make the committed reader 'smarter, faster, better'. Another clue is in the subtitle that, displaying the genre's penchant for [coating its nostrums in the sheen of science](#), pledges to reveal the 'secrets of being productive'. So much for the book's cover, what of its contents? Written by *New York Times* journalist [Charles Duhigg](#), *Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secrets of Being Productive* is structured into eight main chapters, each representing what he labels 'the eight ideas that seem most important in expanding productivity' (6). These begin after a short introduction in which the author explains how he came to write the book, in the process introducing a motif which will reappear throughout: that he has discovered the secret to being 'truly' productive; that this is a fresh scientific discovery; and, lastly, that you and I, the readers, can also get in on the act. After this breathless hush-hush of a beginning – 'could I change my own life?' (4); 'make the audacious achievable' (8); 'recognize the choices that fuel true productivity' (8) and so on – the book starts proper.

Duhigg begins, perhaps unsurprisingly given his project, by discussing that well-whipped guru nag: motivation. It is in this first chapter that Duhigg's basic rhetorical recipe, repeated through each chapter, is debuted: the telling of real-life stories interspersed with (mostly psychological) research to underwrite the do-it-yourself lessons which conclude each section. Thus, on motivation, we get stories of boot camp innovations from the US Army which, as part of a reformed approach to training recruits, apparently no longer requires thoughtless acquiescence to the orders of superiors, but instead soldiers who can 'think for themselves' (23) – think *Full Metal Jacket* directed by Socrates instead of Stanley Kubrick. There are also tales of nursing home rebellion, where a cadre of insurrectionist residents take to making unsanctioned room improvements, thus demonstrating a 'locus of control' which, Duhigg reports, prolonged their lives and promoted 'higher levels of happiness' (32). These are backed up by quotes from various psychologists, not forgetting, of course, to mention the Ivy League schools they generally hail from.



As it goes, this is interesting enough, and the formula sustains itself through chapters on other topics such as goal-setting, managing others and decision making. Duhigg can obviously write and his journalistic talent dials up the dramatic dimensions enough to hold the reader's attention. But the morals he draws at the end of these chapters are often tediously obvious. Take the chapter just mentioned on motivation: the motivation to choose and to do difficult things comes from the fact that they may lead to outcomes we sincerely desire. Was this really a secret to anyone?



Image Credit: World Alarm Clock, Grove Passage, London (Bob Bob CC 2.0)

This is a problem which reoccurs throughout most of the book, and indeed is a staple issue in self-help literature generally. Let's call it obviousism. [Will Self in a similar review context](#) has referred to it as the 'Who knew?' syndrome – the (re)presentation of grandmother-wisdom as newly-revealed scientific truth, which is then prescribed in order to improve someone, somewhere. Following Duhigg's example, I can tell a tale of my own here. I remember once being part of a corporate training programme where an external consultant delivering, it has to be said, an unwanted development intervention to senior managers based on a well-known management self-help book, turned to one of the group (a senior accountant in his late fifties) and said: 'So you see, you must show empathy towards other people in order to collaborate most effectively with them.' He said this proudly and confidently, as though Zeus himself had taught it to him just the night before. The senior accountant looked back at him askance, made something approaching a hybrid smile/grimace and spat back matter-of-factly: 'Sure, my grandmother told me that when I was a child!' The rest of us sniggered guiltily whilst our Hermes retreated, admirably unphased, moving seamlessly onto expounding the next vanilla platitude. Duhigg's book called to my mind this experience, and unfortunately others like it. I am not sure this is quite what its author had in mind.

[Some social scientists have defended obviousism](#), and it is not my intention to suggest that undergirding common sense with rigorous research thinking is always a bad or unnecessary thing to do. But when one is told that they are being let in on a great scientific secret, and when the practical, transformational promises are laid on thick, we are now gliding into guru territory and the critical bar should accordingly be raised high. When the expectations inevitably crash-land, it seems reasonable that those who have tried to seriously engage with such a work may justifiably seek a measure of intellectual recompense in the form of some critically reflexive questioning. To use a criminological metaphor, for the most part Duhigg's book folds under such questioning.

To be fair to the author, there is some nuance to be found in this book and what's more, criticism notwithstanding,

two good chapters ensure that it is not a totally unrewarding read. To end on a positive note, I will conclude with these.

The nuance is buried in the back of the book in the form of a comprehensive notes section. Indeed, we get a [Gibbon-esque](#) seventy-five pages of notes, and they are, for the most part, strong: full of interesting detail and subtle shading of some of the more simplistically put points in the main text. Duhigg has clearly done his research and it shows here. The aforementioned chapter duo covers the subjects of 'Focus' and 'Absorbing Data', respectively. The former contains a genuinely suspenseful rendering of the tragic Air France Flight 447 disaster of 2009, as well as an important moral pertaining to the need to think, as Hannah Arendt once said, '[without bannisters](#)'. It is easily the best chapter in the book and will haunt and instruct in equal measure. The latter chapter contains some good counsel on treating data analysis as a craft and also on the need to undertake more engaged empirical experimentation with the information we receive and create. In an age where [the hype for big data seems to have slowed](#), and yet the [dominance of positivist methodologies](#) continues, this is good advice that is worth heeding. Unlike the majority of the book, these two chapters contain lessons which may not be so obvious to a popular audience. As a result, readers may pay particular attention to these parts. No bad thing.

Richard Cotter is an organisation development professional. He holds a PhD in Management Learning from Maynooth University, Ireland. [Read more reviews by Richard Cotter](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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